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Post-War Sri Lanka: State, Capital and Labor, and the Politics of Reconciliation

Abstract: Sri Lanka has been through vicissitudes of change in the past three decades and its current political order gives the impression of the possibility for a different vision for Sri Lanka. Yet in order to appreciate the continuities and disruptions to Sri Lanka's polity and the possibility of a politics of reconciliation, the contributors to this special issue argue that we also need to reorient our attention away from the state. It is an initial call that seeks to disentangle the ways in which the various constituents that make up the state, including capital and labor, are also implicated or suffer from a tragic perpetuation of an ethno-nationalist agenda that keeps morphing into various guises at fraught moments. A politics of reconciliation then it suggests cannot simply be limited to a political package that does not recognize the very economic disempowerment of large segments of people. The contributors to the special issue come from varying disciplines and adopt a range of methods through to explore how this politics of reconciliation is understood, endorsed and contested in everyday lives of Sri Lankan people.

Introduction

Sri Lanka ended a thirty-year ethnic conflict and war in May 2009. Neglecting the brutal effects of this final war against Tamil civilians, the former President, Mahinda Rajapakse, instead called the post-war context a space within which peace could be achieved through economic development imperatives. It was also a time in which the nation was asked to coalesce under the guise of patriotism (Kadirgamar 2013a), where dissent was not entertained and was to be quelled because of its ability to destabilize the formation of Sri Lanka as a unified post-war nation-state (Jazeel and Ruwanpura 2009). Political discussions about 30-years of ethnic strife, conflict and war were relegated to the sidelines; the state's postwar claim was that Sri Lanka never had ubiquitous ethnic tensions, just a terrorist problem that was obliterated by a powerful and determined government-military apparatus.

Yet as the Rajapakse regime's political power waxed and waned through the post-war years, the mainstream media's focus on Sri Lanka's post-war record underlined the continued fractures in the social polity. It was within a context of social and political discord in the country that the former

President found himself unexpectedly elected out of Presidential-office in early 2015. While for many political pundits this outcome seemed unexpected, a close scrutiny of the Sri Lankan polity discloses how its seams were starting to come undone (Kadirgamar 2013b). The alleged post-war consensus, given shape and voice by the Rajapakse regime, was starting to unhinge and its authoritarian side increasingly revealing itself more readily.

While I trace below some key moments and contradictions of the immediate post-war political regime in Sri Lanka, the purpose of this special issue is to also unpick the triumvirate relationship between state, capital and labor. The post-war Sri Lankan state was able to perpetuate an ethno-nationalist Sinhala hegemony because of the ways in which capital and labor have implicitly or explicitly subscribed to a dominant ethno-nationalist and neoliberal ideology (Kadirgamar 2013b). In fact to presume that the then political regime was able to deploy itself in the manner that it did in the immediate post-war years, without the connivance of capital or labor, in equal and yet differentiated measure is to demarcate Sri Lanka's post-war polity and hegemony in unreflective ways. To put it differently, if we use Gramsci's notion of hegemony, it embraces more than discrete ideologies; it embraces and solidifies ideology and culture in multiple and overlapping spheres, serving to mystify and solidify prevailing class and power structures (Boggs 2002). What we want to trace for post-war Sri Lanka is not just how the state perpetrated everyday and extraordinary violence, but also how it was able to do so because the Sri Lankan spatiality had already been militarized well before 2009 (De Mel 2008, Kadirgamar 2013b). Consequently, ethno-nationalist and majoritarian ideologies permeated the social sphere, including capital and labor. The culpability of Sri Lanka's particular political predicament as a post-war nation then extended beyond the state to its other constituents, including capital and labor - two institutions that have evaded sufficient critical scrutiny in critical scholarship. Rather modestly this special issue attempts to rectify this lacuna and revive a strand of critical scholarship that honed in on the axis between state-capital-labor from the epoch between the colonial and 1983

pogram (Gunasinghe 2004, Jayawardena 1985), and yet has fallen aside in more recent times (Kadirgamar 2013b). Instead of seeing capital as necessarily cosmopolitan or the natural champions of a liberal peace (Venugopal 2010), in this issue, we interrogate both labor and capital for its complicity in structural violence that made the Rajapakse years possible.

Existing literature had started to scrutinize how the Rajapakse regime had intensified and accelerated neoliberal development in its approach to reconstruction and reconciliation (Bastian 2013, Kadirgamar 2013b, 2013c, Keerawella 2013). This work needs our continued attention and intervention to appreciate two-fold conjunctures. Firstly, there is a need to appreciate how a democratic and pluralist state atrophied and was hijacked by chauvinist forces, which invidiously marked all its ethnic communities, save the Sinhala-Buddhists, as outsiders who ought to know their place (Ismail 2013). Secondly, as Kadirgamar (2013c) remarks, post-war Sri Lanka also witnessed the deepening of capital liberalization with resultant economic deprivation for all low-income classes. For him, the absence of economic democratization has meant a failure to discuss economic transformation and how it facilitates new forms of conflict. Scapegoating other minorities in post-war Sri Lanka offers credence to this standpoint; as does the emergent resistance from unexpected quarters - as will be highlighted below. Hence, Kadirgamar (2013a) cautions that a preoccupation with the war and its aftermath is to “disregard the political economic processes shaping Sri Lanka” (2013c:43). This work indicates the need to understand relations between the political economy and ethno-nationalist ideology under the Rajapakse regime. Yet the centrality of the war and its aftermath is an important mark of departure for understanding Sri Lanka’s post-war polity and economy.

Thirty years of war has meant international and national pressure on the Rajapakse regime to acknowledge that it was nigh impossible to conduct a “clean war,” despite its initial denial of war casualties. Fashioning itself after South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), the Sri

Lankan state shied away from truth and instead made a decision to focus on lessons learnt by setting up the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC). This was the state's initial attempt to fashion a transitional justice mechanism. Although the LLRC had many snags and fell far short of its aspirations to be Sri Lanka's equivalent to the TRC (BBC 2011), numerous Human Right Council meetings at the United Nations used the LLRC to pass resolutions regarding the Sri Lankan state.

However, desires for transitional justice and calls for truth telling have a longer time-line within Sri Lanka. While the Sri Lankan state fought an ethnic war for many decades, it also faced two class-based youth insurgencies by the People's Front (JVP), which resulted in violence unleashed by the State towards the JVP and violence perpetrated by the JVP against the state and civilians in the 1970s and late 1980s. The impacts of those insurrections continue to reverberate today, as Dhana Hughes (2013) shows in her careful tracing of how JVP cadres have to constantly negotiate their accountability and moral compass during and after the violence of the 1980s and 1990s.

The state-led violence against the JVP and the LTTE had a bearing on local communities in differentiated and yet critical ways. Family members who bore the emotional cost to decades of violence started to agitate against this state violence. Malathi De Alwis (1998) traces how grieving women deployed "traditional" family values to expand spaces to express their concerns for missing sons, daughters, spouses and siblings. The protest politics of mothers and the Mothers' Fronts were key vehicles through which local communities and women in particular were staking social justice claims and etching the need for truth in the political domain. Mothers from the Sinhalese communities in the South and Tamil communities in the North and East demanded the right to know the fate of sons, daughters, siblings and husbands, who had disappeared, surrendered or were captured. As early as 1984, a Mothers' Front was formed in Jaffna with 10,000 participants

marching on the streets to bear witness to the suffering and disappearances of Tamil youth by the State. (Banarjee 2008).

The quest for social justice and peace was to re-emerge again in the post-war context. On numerous high-profile occasions - including during the Commonwealth Head of Government meetings (CHOGM) held in Sri Lanka, mothers and affected families claimed their right to know the truth and to be served justice. These agitations and mobilizations shaped not just the mandate of the LLRC, but also the ability of the international community to pressurize the Sri Lankan state through various UN resolutions. These international efforts were unable to transform an authoritarian and nationalist regime, and were entangled in Tamil nationalist diaspora politics distant from the economic hardship of those in the North and East of Sri Lanka (Brun and Van Hear 2012). Nonetheless, these initiatives combined with internal factors to cause incessant awkwardness to the Rajapakse regime, which either pugnaciously stoked even more nationalist fervor or were antagonistically dismissed as international conspiracy. Yet these efforts undeniably fractured the Sri Lankan post-war consensus.

As if Sri Lanka had not endured enough violence during a 30-year period, the post-war period was to witness the rise of (or re-emergence from the early independence years) state endorsed violence against a new target - the Muslim community. The post-war regime's refusal to acknowledge the grievances of its Muslim and Tamil communities was not the only nub of continued ethnic tensions; its implicit or active involvement in creating or perpetuating bogey communities was its more violent upshot (Kadirgamar 2013c). Heslop (2014) offers us a timely sketch of how idioms of religious purity and sacredness were resuscitated in post-war Sri Lanka towards violent political ends in Dambulla.¹ He notes how the incident was not singular, but was connected to national politics where escalating and periodic violence against religious minorities and Muslims was becoming

¹ In Abeysekera's (2002) illuminating interventions, the construction of Dambulla as a pivot for the politics of sacredness and Sinhala Buddhist nationalism is traced to 1979, the previous UNP regime and its market liberalization economic policies.

systematic in post-war Sri Lanka. For Muslims this ranged from everyday forms of intimidation, whether threatening Muslim butchers to extraordinary attacks against Muslim traders in various parts of the country. The attack on the Dambulla mosque was, however, a moment in which state complicity in creating yet another bugaboo led to an impasse at the national level. Instead, it offered others the space to gather an on-line and off-line petition addressed to the President that brought communities together under a united slogan of “Not in our Name”. It was to be one of several catalytic moments that would gradually unravel the confidences of majoritarian politics.

While segments of civil society actors challenged the insidious assaults against minority ethnic communities, it was the regime’s engagement with class warfare that led to its ultimate undoing. Social groups that interrupted the regime’s (ethno) nationalist imagination and development imperatives were treated oppressively; yet these communities never went away silently. Several key battles of this nature caught the nation’s imagination and media attention, where the national media registered recurrent disquiet.

Some of these confrontations included local communities protesting against land acquisitions and village disruptions as the state attempted to modernize itself by building costly highways and roads; farmers protesting against the contamination of local waters. These persistent protests illustrated the unsettling and unraveling of a cohesive post-war, neoliberal political economic project (Kadirgamar 2013c). If ethnic conflict had overdetermined struggles during the war years, these instances illuminate the re-emergence of class-conflicts in the post-war years. (Kadirgamar 2013b). The most audacious challenge to the Rajapakse regime was when thousands of factory workers, primarily Sinhalese women workers from the Export Processing Zones of Sri Lanka, took to the streets in 2011 to agitate against and bring to a standstill proposed pension reforms (Ruwanpura 2013). The voter base of a populist regime was signaling brazenly its willingness to assert its collective agency, even at the cost to their lives. The seeds of

discontent were then imbued in the very post-war imaginary; an emphasis on capitalist development imperatives meant that class fissures lead to an open contestation of a homogenous nation state.

Yet the capacities of the Rajapakse regime to continue in the aftermath of its brutal actions against Tamil civilians in 2009 should not be forgotten. Its various constituencies, including labor and capital, offered succor to a hegemonic nation-state vision. As the contributors to the volume show, the massive development and nation awakening invoked by the former President Rajapakse at the 62nd independence day anniversary celebrations offered yet another logic for capital to draw upon. These logics did not necessarily awaken opportunities for all communities and as contributors to this volume show was in fact detrimental to low-income and working class groups. Equally, the cozy relationship that emerged between the military and capital during this phase lead to militarized capitalism marking the post-war economy (Kadirgamar 2013a). The capitalist and elite classes, irrespective of their ethnic affiliations, were to benefit from these emergent state-military-capital relations; and Goger and Ruwanpura (2014) show how this is the case for the three leading apparel industrialists. The suggestion that surface from this volume, however, is not that capital and labor are unmarked and undifferentiated. Through this volume, our purpose is to record that sometimes both these constituencies negotiated the post-war landscape in ways that played into majoritarian politics, while at other times had to bear the incursions of a neoliberal ethno-nationalist project.

Reorienting Attention: The Contributors

Chris Neubert opens this special issue by focusing in on the tea plantation sector; an artifact of the colonial economy that remains vital to the Sri Lankan economy today. Given the centrality of tea production to the economy, the continued wellbeing of the people working and living in the estates ought to be important. Neubert's focus is on the up-country Tamil laboring classes that form the bulk of the labor force in the plantation economy. The plantation economy was built on a system of forced labor

during colonial times, with the unethical economic scheming of yesteryears requiring a parallel political structure to reinforce the plantation economy. While the plantation economy's 200 years of existence has registered change, with collective bargaining being a key redemptive feature of plantation labor, Neubert argues that transformative structural reforms remain elusive for the up-country Tamil laborers. He shows how the resident labor force has limited power to exercise over their laboring economy and their living spaces. He traces for us the constrained agency of up-country Tamils in their efforts to challenge patterns of power and control in the plantation areas as they navigate an authoritarian post-war regime.

Labor remains the topic of Nimanthi Perera-Rajasingham intervention. Similar to up-country Tamil laborers so crucial for the Sri Lankan economy, she focuses on another laboring group equally pivotal for the national economy - women laborers of the apparel industrial sector. By looking at workers' theatre, she disentangles for us how workers are highly perceptive to gendered forms of exploitation within a neoliberal economy, yet remain unable to engage with other forms of oppression, such as violence against minorities. An otherwise class-conscious working class group, hence, leaves the rights of Tamils or Tamil workers facing exploitation or repression at the hands of corporate and state sectors off stage and unscripted. She links these absences to the initial exclusions created in the very architecture of free trade zones, which was envisioned to create employment for young women workers from Sinhalese villages.

Hence, even as the welfare state was disbanded through the adoption of neoliberal policies from the late 1970s, one way in which the state pacified communities who lost social welfare, Perera-Rajasingham argues, was by making these zones ethnic enclaves. Until the near end of the war in 2009, Tamil workers, whether from the North, East or up-country, did not significantly constitute the zone's workforce; hence, she expands on the existing literature on EPZs in Sri Lanka, by arguing that ethnic exclusion was

central to how zones were organized by the state and capital. Political theatre, then scripted and articulated by laborers, was cognizant of workers' exploitation, and yet was unable to appreciate that of others. Her work hence also reveals how off and on-stage performative acts of workers' theatre fed into the exegesis of ethno-nationalist ideology. The paper investigates how ethnic war and neoliberalism interacted with each other at multiple spheres, including in the cultural domain.

Why does the absence of scripting about the oppression of other communities matter in worker theatre? The silences and erasures in workers' theatre speak to the troubled nature of the Sri Lankan polity. They signal not just the pervasiveness of Sri Lankan laborers' inability to appreciate the exploitation and oppression of up-country Tamil workers, which Neubert thoughtfully outlines, but also end up offering succor to a regime that fundamentally thwarts solidarity politics based on class. Being mute and neglecting the oppression and exploitation of others is what makes possible it for the state to become both authoritarian and militarized in the name of the nation (De Mel 2008). In contrast to Spencer (2016 *forthcoming*), who suggests that the securitization phase of Sri Lanka was an empty and pointless order, the contributions by Caron, Widger, Sathkunanathan and Nagaraj underline the material consequences of this period for different communities.

Caron shows that the armed forces captured and cleared LTTE controlled areas in the North and the East even prior to the end of Sri Lanka's war in 2009, with the pretext that displaced families would now be able to return home and rebuild their lives and livelihoods. However, returning "home" is fraught with difficulties for the displaced. The continuation of high security zones and state territorialisation projects via the military hinder and spoil local understandings of the landscape. Caron's point is not merely an allegorical concern with 'home'; she shows how the displaced are unable to physically access houses, land, and resources with material consequences, such as their inability to access fertile agricultural land for cultivation. The

effect is to render the return of the displaced to be incomplete and a nagging denial of belonging and citizenship in the post-war nation. When the claims and losses of the displaced and returnees are denied or not offered voice, legitimate political questions about citizenship prerogatives by returnees never make it to the political arena. The post-war process around reconciliation hence never grapples with the claims of all its citizenry; a privation linked to deepening militarized liberalization (Kadirgamar 2013b), where the needs of realtors and financial capital are prioritized over displaced people.

The troubled outcome of the militarized securitization process alongside the “development for peace” narrative of the post-war Sri Lankan state poses strains not simply for the Muslim returnees traced by Caron, but as Sathkunathan shows, the militarized surveillance gradually naturalized in formerly conflicted areas exacerbates or creates ruptures between and within traumatized communities. She outlines for us how the military surveillance strategy adopted by the state, mirrors the very same policing tactics deployed by the LTTE in their areas of control. Recruitment of informants, surveillance of close family and kin and such were encouraged and promoted by the LTTE, even as it came to be reviled by the communities themselves. The fact that the state in cahoots with the military is arraying strategies no different from para-military forces meant that suspicion and fear were aggravated rather than ameliorated. Rebuilding trust and social relations across the ethnic communities in particular is hence hampered and derailed, with questions cast on any genuine commitment to reconciliation thwarted.

While Sathkunathan’s research in the post-war context is troubling, this strategy of policing and surveillance is not new for the state. Hughes (2013) shows how during the political conflict and tensions at the height of the JVP, similar stratagems were used to the detriment of kin and community relations. Temporally speaking, the continuum of everyday state violence has a longer history than post-war Sri Lanka, pointing to the degree of

normalization of observation mechanisms in a democratic polity. Yet, both Sathkunanathan and Hughes note how there were and are always counter strategies to foster trust and intra-community bonds in both periods, as restricted as they may be.

While the culpability of the state is unquestionable, its ability to endure also has much to do with the ways in which capitalist classes are implicitly or explicitly complicit in promoting an ethno-nationalist neoliberal agenda. For Widger this is linked to the difficulties the business sector encounters with majoritarian politics and find itself serving this constituency, while for Nagaraj, it is more fundamentally about how capital draws upon a militarized state for its further incursions into the polity, economy and society. Either way, how capital draws upon logics beyond the capitalist economy for its perpetuation and penetration, signals that capitalism can be both nationalist and militarized. It echoes previous interventions that feature militarization in the cultural spheres of advertising (De Mel 2008), as well as Kadirgamar's (2013a) more pointed attention to economic transformations propelled by militarized tropes and political strategies.

Widger and Nagaraj develop this line of thought in different ways in this volume. For Widger, the pursuance of good governance by the corporate sector is an earnest effort to promote equitable ethno-religious ends: liberal capitalism literally. Drawing from Venugopal's arguments (2010) that Sri Lankan capital is cosmopolitan, Widger too argues that the corporate sector is interested in shaping a harmonious and peaceful society through ethical business practices. He specifically looks at the efforts by the business sector to manage diversity and inclusiveness in human resourcing, brand development, market expansion and outsourcing. Nevertheless, he finds is that the corporate 'good governance' and philanthropic agendas, associated with various realms of corporate social responsibility, are also imbued with nationalist fervor. Because the corporate sector has to frequently negotiate with a vocal ethno-nationalist constituency, evading its Sinhala-Buddhist tenor appears unlikely and impossible even. Quite in contrast to the

cosmopolitan capitalism or business for peace alluded to by Venugopal (2010), what Widger's careful sketching unmask is how ethno-nationalism permeates the various corporate equality and good governance initiatives. This work is a salutary reminder of the central importance of moving beyond discursive strategies employed by the corporate sector, whether in Sri Lanka or elsewhere, to unearth its practices.

The rationale for the private sector, as it is invested in ethno-nationalist and militarized politics in Sri Lanka, is explored further in Nagaraj's contribution to this issue. Through his work with the former textile mill workers at Mayura Place, we are offered an account of the precarious position they find themselves in relation to the rights to their dwellings and the city. The vicissitudes faced by the former mill workers are bound up with the ways in which the state, capital, and the military have defined the parameters of their economic and social rights. The article illustrates not just how capital colludes with the state and military to foster its interest - but also how class too is a crucial vector of differentiation in the post-war polity.

The Wellawatte Spinning and Weaving Mills (the mills) is of historical significance to the labor and Left movements in Sri Lanka (Jayawardena 1972). For three generations, the former mill workers residing at Mayura Place have lived a perilous existence with uncertainty around their rights to their line homes. In post-war Sri Lanka, their insecurity has been heightened through the active targeting and demonizing of their working-class neighborhoods. Nagaraj points to the disjuncture herein, where even as the working classes are demonized, the land they occupy is valorized. Working class neighborhoods, he shows, are pilloried, as urban regeneration and transformation projects became the backbone of a post-war nation state engrossed in urban beautification. He shows how the spatial practices of the Urban Development Authority (the UDA) is deeply imbricated in a militarized capitalist agenda that plays more than lip service to Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. As capital makes incursions into hitherto un-valorized

territory, and for mega housing complexes to make rentier profits out of, it has few misgivings in colluding with the military and an authoritarian state to do its bidding. Nagaraj's intervention eliminates any delusion that it is only the state that was wedded to a militarized ethno-nationalist agenda; capital too is entangled in these logics because the ethno-military complex enables it to flourish. The wasteland and wondering populace generated through capital's incursion is the inevitable feature of the post-colonial capitalist economy alluded to by Sanyal (2014). Yet, and despite these unholy, although not unlikely, alliances between capital, the state and the military, Nagaraj also traces how the former millworkers resisted their eviction by uniting and crafting alternative possibilities. Such moments of resistance echo with Neubert, Caron and Sathkunathan's contributions towards this volume.

Concluding Thoughts

All authors contributing to this volume explore how the Rajapakse regime existed in its particular shape and form, and link it to the multiple constituents—the state, capital and labor—implicitly or explicitly supporting the regime. This volume reprioritizes capital and labor, and recognizes how these institutional spaces are as crucial for appreciating why Sri Lanka's polity took the shape that it did in the immediate post-war period. The perpetuation and deepening of neoliberal exigencies from 1977 to the post-war period thus undergird the ideological maneuvers of the Rajapakse years. Hence, despite unexpected political ruptures, the space for an ethnically peaceful and harmonious future is not a given. These contributions also point to how ethnic identity politics alone is not the key vector of social polarization and differentiation in Sri Lanka. As Kadirgamar (2013a) points out, international preoccupations with reconciliation are carried out at the cost of growing class and income inequality and increasing dispossession of local communities-across all three ethnic groups. By bringing the state-capital-labor into conversation with each other in the post-war Sri Lanka situation, this special issues hopes to unpick how dominant economic models

and a particular politics of reconciliation are challenging or re-inscribing old power asymmetries and tensions, whereby a politics of hate and fear has the space to endure.

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